

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL CY
BARTLETT, COMMANDER, 770TH AIR EXPEDITIONARY ADVISORY SQUADRON,
COALITION
AIR FORCE TRAINING TEAM, CAFTT, TAJI AIR BASE VIA TELECONFERENCE
FROM IRAQ

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): And this is
Jack. Who's joining us?

CAPT. DAVID ROY (sp): I'm the Public Affairs officer -- one of the Public
Affairs officers, MNSTC-I, and I have with me Lieutenant Colonel Cy Bartlett.

MR. HOLT: All right. I believe we are ready when the colonel is, so
whenever you're ready, Colonel Bartlett.

COL. BARTLETT: Good evening. I'm Lieutenant Colonel Cy Bartlett. I'm
here with the 770th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron. I'm a part of the
Coalition Air Forces Transition Team, and our mission is to help build the Iraqi
air force.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And let's see, who else have we got -- who have we got on the line right
now? We've got Jarred Fishman, and Andrew Lubin still with us. And somebody
else just joined us here -- who's that?

Q It's William, Jack.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

All right, somebody just dropped off. Sorry, Colonel. We were just getting going here.

And I understand you're wrapping up your 12-month -- the end of -- you're at the end of your 12-month deployment, sir?

COL. BARTLETT: Yes, sir, I'm coming up on the end of 12 months just outside of Baghdad, Iraq. The squadron that I lead, we have a mission to advise Iraqi air force helicopter operations, and up at the base that I work at they have Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters, American-made L-UH1 helicopters (sp) and also L-U206 helicopters (sp). And we do training. We fly combat operations. We do undergraduate pilot training. We do transition training. On any given day we may be flying infrastructure protection missions moving the DVs, high-ranking Iraqi officials back and forth, or going outside and flying our Mi-17s in conjunction with the UH1s, training with Iraqi special operations forces.

There's always something going on in the unit. We started earlier this year just a couple of training missions a week, and by the end of the year we'd amassed almost 3,000 flying hours and over 500 combat missions.

MR. HOLT: Very good, sir.

Andrew Lubin.

Q Sir, yes, Andrew Lubin from the Military Observer. Thanks for taking the time to speak with us. What are you doing for pilot training? Are they able to get out there and do ops like we do or how do they actually operate?

COL. BARTLETT: Well, that's an interesting question, Mr. Lubin. We're doing a couple of things. There's a sister squadron up to the north actually does full-blown, undergraduate pilot training as their primary mission.

At my location, we have a lot of instructors, and we have the Bell 206 helicopter, and we had some students who hadn't finished pilot training and some pilots who'd never entered. So what we did is, we put together our own course at my base using some instructors from the Iowa Army National Guard. So we've been putting a few students through that course. They get trained as pilots initially, and then we conduct transition training in the Bell UH-1 or in the Russian-made Mi-17 and they get out flying combat missions after that.

Q They fly with us or they fly on their own?

COL. BARTLETT: The Bell 206 program now has Iraqi pilots doing the training. When they get into the UH-1, they fly with a combination of Iraqi instructors and U.S. instructors. Depending on their English level, we'll determine whether or not they get to fly with a coalition pilot, and we've been very successful in flying combat missions with an Iraqi pilot, a U.S. pilot, an Iraqi gunner and a U.S. gunner. And we've also reached the point this year where the Iraqis have been able to fly combat missions by themselves.

Q Interesting. Okay.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q I'm sorry, where are you -- where are they based out of?

COL. BARTLETT: We're just outside of Baghdad at a place called Taji.

MR. HOLT: At the Taji Air Base, right.

Q Okay. Okay.

COL. BARTLETT: Yes, sir?

Q I'm going to be -- sir, I'm going to be over there next week. With luck, I'm going to turn around and see if I can come up. I'm going to talk to my people in CPIC and see what we can arrange, if you don't mind.

COL. BARTLETT: Okay, sir, that would be wonderful.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Jarred, are you still with us?

Q Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. It's always a pleasure -- Air Force lieutenant -- to speak to other people. We usually have Army on here, so it's great to have some of the Air Force come back on.

COL. BARTLETT: (Chuckles.)

Q If you could talk a little bit -- we saw an article in the DOD or MNF-I last week showing fixed-wing -- it was almost a Gulfstream type, I guess, to ferry around some of the leadership of Iraq. And as I said, I guess we sent over eight of those Dariens (sp). So if you could talk a little bit about -- to the training of the pilots on not just the helicopters but fixed-wing aircraft as well, and then I have a follow-up after that.

COL. BARTLETT: Yes, sir. The airplane that you saw was a brand- new Beech King Air 350ER, and we're getting a couple of versions of those. One of them is going to be a slick version. They're going to use for training, and another version is going to be used for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations down the road.

Now what we're going to do is, we start their pilots -- (audio break) -- pilots in Cessnas, just like we start pilots in the United States. So they go through an undergraduate pilot type of training in fixed-wing. They get (tracked ?), and in this case, they will go fly twin-engine aircraft like the King Air 350. And that's a stepping stone. Some of them will continue flight in the King Air; some of them might go on to the C-130s we have in Iraq. Does that answer your question, sir?

Q Yeah. Great, thanks. And a follow-up also is, with the new de-Ba'athification law being passed, obviously the vast majority of the people that were in Saddam's air force were Sunnis and were probably kicked out. And I know it's been a problem trying to go to UPT, trying to get new pilots up and flying. So do you see that there's going to be any more of an influx from the older pilots who had served before and then were prohibited and might now be able to come back into the air force?

COL. BARTLETT: Yes, we've actually seen that today. At the base that I work at, there's a mix. There are Sunni and Shi'a that fly there. And there are going to be opportunities in the future for Iraqis to come back and fly.

We have a lot of aircraft right now. We need more pilots. So there's a recruiting effort going on right now to bring some of these older pilots back, to help them bridge to building the new Iraqi air force. We're just getting the pipeline started with our undergraduate pilot training now to bring the new lieutenants on line. So over the course of the next few years, some of these individuals from the old regime will be very valuable to help bring that experience in.

A lot of the aircraft that we have -- the Russian MI-17 aircraft, in particular -- are aircraft that are relatively simple, and in the MI-17's case, aircraft that they're familiar with. So we hope to leverage the experience of some of these folks from the past. And we actually have used these individuals to become instructors in the MI-17s already to help train the new generation.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. That kind of answers one of the questions that I had, was, as you're taking some of these new pilots from the 206s into the MI-17, how are they handling the transition.

GOL. BARTLETT: Well, we have a very small number of the new pilots going into the MI-17, and we're taking it relatively slow with them. So we don't have a whole bunch of data points. But what we have seen is the undergraduate pilot training that they've done with the Iraqis has been very good and they have solid skills. So I don't see there being much of a problem in them making the transition to the MI-17. It's a larger helicopter, but these guys have very sound fundamentals. One of the instructors that we have here at Taji, an Iraqi pilot, was a senior instructor previously, so a ton of experience and a great mentor.

MR. HOLT: Excellent.

Anyone else with a question? Did I miss anyone?

Q I have a follow-up. Jarred, do you want to go ahead?

Q Go ahead, Andrew.

Q Yeah. Colonel, Andrew Lubin again. Going back to the Iraqi pilots and Iraqi gunners, are you also working them into the air control system? I mean, you're going to start putting Iraqis in the towers?

COL. BARTLETT: Part of the long-range plan is to bring the Iraqis up to speed. We are currently training Iraqi air traffic controllers. And they're actually Iraqis that work in the tower down at Baghdad International Airport.

Q Okay. Are you using any of the people from the old regime, so to speak; you know, the pre-March 2003 pilots and air traffic controllers at all?

COL. BARTLETT: We're using a lot of the pilots from pre-2003. They were vetted to be brought back into the air force. And we have a wide cross-section of people. We have about -- we have almost 500 people, Iraqis -- (inaudible) -- that I currently (work with ?). And they're Sunnis and they're Shias, and we've managed to work all together and get these guys up in the air flying the flag of Iraq over the country.

Q Great. Okay, thanks.

MR. HOLT: Jarred?

Q Yes, sir. Can you talk a little bit about -- to the future plans? Is there an ability for foreign military sales by the -- actually ordering more United States planes, like Boeing planes or our Lockheed Martin planes, to actually start instituting something where it will be a long-term type of relationship between the Iraqi government and the U.S. aerospace industry?

COL. BARTLETT: Yes, sir, there is that opportunity for them to leverage the opportunities available under foreign military sales. A lot of the newer aircraft purchases that they have made have been under that program.

Q Great. And then if you could also talk a little bit about too the capabilities for ISR, for airlift, if there's a future -- you know, I'm sure, years down the road, if we wanted to go to air refueling -- and then the ability for the Iraqi air force to relate and cooperate with the Iraqi -- with their other security forces. In other words, how's that going as far as them being able share information quickly in a mission-critical sense?

COL. BARTLETT: That's a pretty big question, sir. I'll break it up into a couple of parts.

In the near term, the Iraqi air force is focused on building system of capabilities to fight counterinsurgency. A key piece to that is being able to train their (maintainers ?), their pilots and their support personnel, and to be able to have the capability to make that training self-sustaining, (getting ?) the Iraqis to become the instructors, so they can train the next generation -- one of the key objectives of the Coalition Air Forces Transition Team here that I'm a part of.

So we have (current ?) units, different squadrons that are building these different capabilities. There's a air force training school that does the basic type of military training and some of the technical skills. They're training the new generation. And out in the field we have several squadrons. My squadron's focused on helicopter operations. We have another squadron that's focused on C- 130 operations. And we have two other squadrons that are working on ISR using a Cessna Caravan and also using a small plane, general aviation, called a CH-2000.

Additionally, we have one more squadron that is building the future through undergraduate pilot training. They're using a modified version of the Cessna 172, using a diesel engine, with great success, to the north, in Kirkuk.

So what we're doing with these airframes is giving a counterinsurgency capability to transport (and conduct ISR ?). In the future, they'll be looking towards doing more battlefield (mobility ?) and doing direct support of combat troops.

Part of the (training ?) over the course of the past year is to build the relationship with Iraqi special operations forces and to provide training and familiarization to those troops. And we're working out the interoperability issues with the platforms we have right now through that training.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right. Anyone else?

Q Well, I have some more follow-ups, if we have more time.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Sure. Go ahead.

Q All right. Yesterday -- can you talk about a little bit -- does the Iraqi government -- how do they view the role of the air force? I know you see, you know, different articles here in the States saying that the Iraqis are always proud when they see a C-130 which has an Iraqi flag rather than a U.S. flag. So perhaps maybe if you could talk a little bit about -- on the human level or the Iraqi level or patriotic level, does the government see a real role for the Iraqi air force and does the society see a role for the air force?

COL. BARTLETT: Yes, they definitely do. It's been a very exciting year. We started 2007 hardly flying any missions with the helicopters that I work with. By the end of the year we had flown successful missions down near Karbala, down near Basra, and many VIP missions taking the leaders of Iraq to the outlying areas, so they could have that access to the population.

With the helicopters, we fly at relatively low altitudes, altitudes where it's easy for the local population to discern whether it's a U.S. helicopter or an Iraqi helicopter. All of the Iraqi helicopters have a large flag on the bottom of them.

When I started flying here, a lot of people would look at the helicopters or hear the helicopters and -- (audio break) -- kids would look down -- (audio break). (Audio break) -- lot of the people have come to recognize the sound of the Iraqi helicopters, and the mothers are actually bringing their children outside to see the helicopters. Kids are looking up from the soccer fields, and there's a lot of waving going on.

There is a lot of pride in the fact that the Iraqi air force is flying. It is a visible symbol of the government of Iraq, and this is very valuable in the counterinsurgency campaign. Where there might not be an Iraqi soldier or an Iraqi police officer around the corner, there may well be an Iraqi aircraft flying overhead. That's one of the things. Unofficially part of our mission here is we're inspiring hope in the future for the Iraqi air force and for the people of Iraq.

I visited here in 2005 as part of an assessment team, and we saw a lot of folks who had been defeated. The United States, the coalition -- they'd beat them in war twice over the course of their career in many cases. And now, a couple of years later, we've got guys who have a lot of pride. We have the first Iraqi-trained pilots, modern-era, to come through our UH-1 course, to graduate there and to go out and fly combat missions over Baghdad.

It's been a very exciting time over the course of 2007, and 2008 will be even more exciting, because the Iraqi air forces is a more viable organization. And they work together, with their helicopters working in conjunction with ISR assets and their special operations forces. And we're looking at the point where some of the missions, that the coalition did, are being picked up by the organic Iraqi assets.

MR. HOLT: Okay, and anything else?

Q One quick question about -- a little off-theme but since I'm in the Air Force, the problems with our F-15s here -- are you seeing any kind of

problems over there operationally about having the Falcons over there and Eagles? Actual -- with the weather conditions and everything like that, has there been any degradation of our actual fighter aircraft?

COL. BARTLETT: I'm sorry, sir. I'm really not in a position to comment on that. I'm pretty much focused on helicopter operations in this assignment.

MR. HOLT: Okay, all right, thank you very much. Colonel Bartlett, thank you very much for being with us. If there's nothing else, do you have any -- I'll give everybody one more chance.

Anything else out there?

Q No, I'm good, but thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, do you have any closing thoughts, closing comments for us today?

COL. BARTLETT: Yes, sir.

I think this is a very important time for the Iraqi air force. The Iraqi army started being rebuilt after coalition forces came into Baghdad. 2003, 2004 were very big years for getting their effort off the ground.

Here in Coalition Air Force's Transition Team we look at the effort really just getting off the ground this year -- sorry -- 2007 being the big year and 2008 following on and even more activity.

For my operation, there was very little flying that happened in 2006. In 2007, they flew over 3,000 hours. We have multiple pilots qualified; pilots qualified in, like, the UH-1 for the first time, and men qualified in the Mi-17 team who hadn't flown in five, 10, 15 years in some cases. The Iraqi air force is coming on strong. They have limited resources right now, but they're building and they're growing, and this is going to be the case over the course of the next couple years with the Iraqi air force.

The Iraqi army has fielded a lot of battalions and has a lot of strength right now. The Iraqi air force is just passed its infancy, but it's in the building phase, and there's a lot of good work to do. And I think you're going to see a lot more of that effort over the course of the next few years as there are more Iraqi helicopters, King Airs and C-130s, and down the road fast-moving aircraft that are flying over Iraq. As the Iraqis move forward, win the counterinsurgency, develop their own training institutions and move towards the day when they're able to defend their own air space and support the sovereignty of the government of Iraq.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. Lieutenant Colonel Cy Bartlett, who is the commander of the 870th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron at Taji Air Base in Iraq. Thank you so much for being with us, sir.

COL. BARTLETT: Yes, sir, you're welcome.

MR. HOLT: And we look forward to speaking about the Iraqi air force and the training program, which, evidently, is going to have to get a whole lot more robust over the next year with all the influx of new and different equipment they'll be flying.

COL. BARTLETT: Yes, sir, a lot of good work to be done here, and I am the commander of the 7-7-0, 770th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron.

MR. HOLT: I apologize. I think I got a typographical error in my information here. The 770th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron.

Thank you very much for being with us, sir.

COL. BARTLETT: Yes, sir. Thank you and have a good day.

Q Thanks, Colonel. Appreciate the time.

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